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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies of children's judgments of culpability have usually involved asking children questions about hypothetical actors presented in stories or on videotape. The current study attempted a naturalistic study of attributions of blame by observing children in spontaneously occurring remedial interchanges, situations in which an interactant is called upon to give some account for his or her behavior. Ten elementary school classrooms (kindergarten through fourth grade) were observed for one week each, yielding 1146 instances of remedial interchanges. The interchanges were divided into moves, according to a Goffman-type model. A system for classifying moves in remedial interchanges and a more detailed system for classifying remedy moves are presented. Age-related changes and differences related to the presence or absence of an adult are presented. These findings are compared to the picture of developing moral judgments that has emerged from previous experimental research. (Author/RH)

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NEGOTIATION OF RESPONSIBILITY  
IN THE DISCOURSE OF SCHOOL CHILDREN

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## Abstract

Previous studies of children's judgments of culpability have usually involved asking children questions about hypothetical actors presented in stories or on videotape. The current study attempted a naturalistic study of attributions of blame by observing children in spontaneously occurring remedial interchanges, situations in which an interactant is called upon to give some account for his or her behavior. Ten elementary school classrooms (kindergarten through fourth grade) were observed for one week each, yielding 1146 instances of remedial interchanges. The interchanges were divided into moves, according to a Goffman-type model (Goffman, 1971). A system for classifying moves in remedial interchanges, and a more detailed system for classifying remedy moves is presented. Age-related changes and differences related to the presence or absence of an adult are presented. These findings are compared to the picture of developing moral judgments that has emerged from previous experimental research.

NEGOTIATION OF RESPONSIBILITY  
IN THE DISCOURSE OF SCHOOL CHILDREN

A good deal of research has been done in the last ten years on children's social judgments -- especially on their judgments of blame-worthiness (see reviews by Shantz, 1976 and Karniol, 1978). Almost without exception, this research has elicited children's judgments about hypothetical events presented in stories or on videotaped or filmed sequences. Although these studies have produced some very interesting findings about children's notions of intentionality, reciprocity, etc., they suffer from a problem of ecological validity. We do not have a very good feel for the importance of these concepts in the every day life of the children studied. The problem is that in order to study social judgments, we must elicit them and ask subjects to report about about them. It is difficult to know whether these experimentally induced attributions are similar to those spontaneously made in real-life situations.

Although cognitive processes like those involved in moral judgments have not seemed eminently observable in natural settings, there is a domain of interaction which I believe to be very revealing of naturally occurring moral judgments. It is a domain which Irving Goffman (1971) has written about in adult interaction -- he calls it

remedial interchanges. These are situations in which people are called upon to provide accounts for their own behavior. This study has focused on naturally occurring situations in which children get into remedial interchanges.

Using a modified event sampling technique with narrative recording, I collected observations of elementary school children. Ten classrooms, grades kindergarten through fourth, were observed for one week each. All were open classrooms, in which children spent a major part of the school day in small learning centers containing two to six children, often with no adult in the immediate vicinity. One or two observers collected narrative observations of remedial interchanges occurring in these learning centers. Approximately 90 hours of observation time yielded 1146 instances of interactions which met the definition of remedial interchanges. The presence of two observers for approximately 25% of the data collection enabled assessment of the reliability of various aspects of the procedure. The observers were in agreement about the occurrence of an interchange 79.3% of the time, with 40% of the misses occurring during minutes in which more than one interchange was going on at the same time. Agreement about the ver batum content of the interactions was 72.6%. Typed transcripts of the interactions observed were divided into moves and coded according to a detailed hierarchical category system. Overall reliability of these coding decisions was 95.5% with reliability for individual categories ranging from 82.1 to 100%.

The handout gives a few examples of remedial interchanges. They begin when one of the participants in an interaction points out the inappropriateness of the behavior of another participant. For instance, turn to Example 1. Leslie points out, with considerable alarm, that Angela has colored on the table. This is a challenge move--an accusation. Challenges can be very direct ("You are standing on my foot,") or rather subtle ("Do you really need to stand right there?"). They may be verbal or non-verbal, but they always call upon the person challenged to effect some repair.

There are a number of ways a challenged person can respond. The most acceptable way, from an adult point of view, is to offer a remedy. The last page of your handout offers a classification system developed from the remedies observed in this data set. As you can see from the handout, remedies have been classified into four major types. Compliance remedies entail an acceptance by the miscreant that the challenge was valid. The person challenged communicates that, although he or she has misbehaved in the past, acceptable behavior can be expected in the future. The second type of remedy is the denial. Here the challenged person denies having caused the outcome in question. Excuses are remedies in which the challenged person admits that the outcome in question was undesirable, but claims that he or she should not be held responsible. Responsibility can be denied on the basis of inadequate foreknowledge, the absence of intentionality, or the inability to behave appropriately. Finally,

a fourth type of remedy observed was the justification. Here, the challenged person admits responsibility for the act in question, but makes a claim that the act was not really inappropriate under the circumstances. Justifications include denials or minimization of damage, appeals to reciprocity or other "higher goals," and denials of the validity of the sanction against the behavior.

All of these remedies are similar in that they assure the challenger that, although something untoward may appear to have happened, the person challenged is not generally antagonistic to the rules of good conduct and future interaction can continue on the assumption that such rules will be followed. In a prototypical remedial interchange, the remedy will be followed by a relief, or acceptance move from the challenger (e.g., "That's OK; I understand,") and the interaction will return to its original focus.

As it turns out, children do not always give remedies in response to challenges. Page 2 of the hand-out defines the other types of moves which were observed in response to challenges. Frequencies of the various types of responses were examined at the different age levels and according to whether or not an adult was participating in the interaction.

I have time to present only a few of the findings of this study-- and before I even do that, I would like to mention a couple of interesting non-findings. First, the most noted result of previous moral judgment research is a shift from objective to subjective

criteria for blame judgments. Younger children seem to base their judgments on an assessment of the damage done; older children seem to base their judgments on an assessment of the actor's intent. Based on this previous research, one might expect to find that younger children will try to remedy by denying damage (remedy type IV-A on page 3 of the handout). There should be relatively few denials of intent (III-B) among kindergarten-first graders. As a matter of fact, denials of damage and denials of intent occurred with nearly equal frequency at every age, both being relatively infrequent responses (accounting for about 4% of the remedies).

Another interesting non-finding: The concept of reciprocity plays a very important role in children's developing ideas about social justice according to Piaget (1932/1965) and according to Kohlberg (1969). The children I observed ranged from 5 1/2 to 10 years of age. Out of 1719 remedies, I observed only 23 appeals to a reciprocity norm. There was no evidence for any change with age in frequency of this type of response. However, reciprocity appeals were about twice as likely to happen in interchanges with adult participants. Only 7 times in 1146 interchanges did children cite reciprocity norms in attempts to negotiate justice with other children.

Now that I've used up most of my time telling you what interesting things I did not find, I have a couple of minutes left to tell you a few of the things I did find. First, there were

several differences related to the presence or absence of adults. When children were interacting with adults, they tended to produce more ambiguous moves (mumbling, sighing, etc), more no response moves, and more remedies ( $LR \chi^2 (7) = 267.98, p < .001$ ).<sup>1</sup> They especially gave more compliance remedies (type I-A in the handout) ( $LR \chi^2 (3) = 56.98, p < .008$ ). By contrast, when children attempted social repair without the benefit of an adult's presence, the interchanges generally looked more like negotiations of social justice. Children were more likely to deny that they were the cause of the bad effect (remedy type II), and they were more likely to make justifications (remedy type IV) to other children than to adults ( $LR \chi^2 (3) = 56.98, p < .008$ ). They were especially more likely to use justification type D, denying the validity of the rule ( $LR \chi^2 (3) = 13.32, p < .01$ ). Remedial interchanges among children involved discussions or arguments about what the appropriate behavior should be much more often than they involved discussions about the extent of damage done or about the intent of the act or about the 'fairness' of the thing.

There were also some interesting differences between younger and older children. Third and fourth graders were much more likely than kindergarten-first graders to respond to a challenge with a counter-challenge ( $LR \chi^2 (2) = 8.89, p < .013$ ). The older children were also much more likely to reject a remedy once it was offered ( $LR \chi^2 (2) = 5.74, p < .059$ ), and were more likely to produce

defiant responses when their remedies were rejected ( $LR \chi^2 (7) = 15.94$ ,  $p < .026$ ). Generally, a picture emerges of older children as more adversative than younger children in this age range. Younger children, on the other hand, were more likely than older children to fail to respond at all when challenged ( $LR \chi^2 (2) = 8.89$ ,  $p < .013$ ). Generally they looked less flexible--less adept with the social repair ritual. Not knowing what to do when challenged, they frequently did nothing at all.

This is a domain of discourse which holds a great deal of promise for future study in developmental psychology. For one thing, remediation is an important social skill, and ought to be studied as an area of social development. But besides its importance to the child's social adjustment, the remedial interchange could reveal a great deal about children's understanding of the social world--their understanding of what counts as inappropriate behavior, their understanding of what counts as a challenge and their ideas about when an actor should and should not be held responsible for an effect.

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FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>A series of log linear chi square analyses were used to examine multi-way contingency tables in an analysis of variance model. The procedure is described in Brown (1977), and is more thoroughly explained in Davis (1972).

Some Examples of the Social Repair  
Work of School Children

EXAMPLE 1

Interchange 631: Art Center. 3rd-4th grade.  
Leslie, Stephanie, Debbie and Angela are coloring.

- Ch 1. a. Leslie: Let's all try not to get it--AHHHHHHHHH!  
--on the table.
- Ch c. (Leslie points to the table where Angela has  
colored over the edge of her paper onto the table.)
- Amb 2. a. Angela: OH!
- Rem Ia b. (Angela rubs vigorously on the crayon marks.)
- Rem IVa c. Angela: Don't worry--it came off.
- Rlf 3. a. Leslie: It will come off. (spoken in a  
conciliatory tone.)

EXAMPLE 2

Interchange 719. Spelling Center. 3rd-4th grade.  
John, Jason, Fran, Michael and Jonathan are sitting around a table  
working on the spelling assignment. Jason stands up.

- Ch 1. a. John-Jason: XYZ-PDQ!
- Rem Ia 2. a. (Jason quickly zips his pants.)

EXAMPLE 3

Interchange 605. Art Center. 3rd-4th grade.  
Stephanie, Angela, Michele and Becca are sitting around a round table.  
All are coloring except Stephanie, who is reading a book. Stephanie  
starts singing the words to her book.

- Ch 1. a. Michelle-Stephanie: Sing for us later, honey chile.
- Def 2. a. (Stephanie keeps on singing the words to her book,  
without looking up.)

## EXAMPLE 4

Interchange 266. Reading Center. K-1st grade.  
 Alisa and Letitia are standing at the counter, writing.  
 Matthew and Alan are sitting on pillows looking at a book.

- |         |    |    |                                                                                          |
|---------|----|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ch      | 1. | a. | Letitia-Alisa (looking at Alisa's paper);<br>Un-unh, that's not a seven.                 |
| Ch      |    | b. | Letitia: That's a funny number.<br>(Alisa has made a cross on the leg of the numeral, 7) |
| Rem IVd | 2. | a. | Alisa: That's how some people make sevens.                                               |
| Ch      | 3. | a. | Letitia: In our city we don't make them like that.                                       |
| NR      | 4. | a. | Alisa does not respond.                                                                  |

## EXAMPLE 5

Interchange 198. Language Arts Center. 1st-2nd grade.  
 Jamey, Sunita, Jeff and Greg are working on the assignment and talking.  
 Greg's voice is very hoarse.

- |          |    |    |                                |
|----------|----|----|--------------------------------|
| Ch       | 1. | a. | Jamey-Greg: Clear your throat. |
| Rem IIIc | 2. | a. | Greg: I can't.                 |
| Rem IIIc |    | b. | Greg: I got a horse.           |
| Ch       | 3. | a. | Jamey: Sounds funny.           |
| Rem Ib   | 4. | a. | Greg: I know.                  |

WAYS TO RESPOND TO A CHALLENGE  
(for example, "You stole my eraser.")

- C-Ch Counter-challenge: Call into question the appropriateness or worthiness of some aspect of the challenger's behavior or character. ("Well, you're doing the wrong assignment.") (Reliability=97.2%)
- Rem Remedy: Reassurance given on behalf of the person challenged that he or she does in fact hold allegiance to the rules of social intercourse, and can be expected to behave in an acceptable manner in the future. (See subclassification.) (Reliability = 94.5)
- Def Defiant Response: Indicate antagonism towards the rules or towards the challenger. ("So what if I did, sucker?") (Reliability = 92.8%)
- N.R. No Response: No observable verbal or non-verbal behavior recorded. (Reliability = 100%)
- Amb Ambiguous Response: Verbal or non-verbal acts which have unclear meaning in the interchange. ("Oh well." Or, a sigh or smile) (Reliability = 83.3%)
- S.S. Side Sequence: A brief diversion from the interchange to clarify something, or to take care of an irrelevant interruption. ("What did you say?" "I said I can't find it.") (Reliability = 100%)

## CLASSIFICATION OF REMEDIES

- I. Comply with the challenger (Reliability = 96.6%)
  - A. Alter the challenged behavior to make it appropriate.  
(Stop doing the misdeed; start behaving appropriately.)  
(Reliability = 100%)
  - B. Admit guilt. ("Oh, I did the wrong thing.")  
(Reliability = 96.1%)
  - C. Plead for mercy or forgiveness. ("Please don't tell anyone I did that.") (Reliability = 100%)
  - D. Apologize. ("I'm sorry.") (Reliability = 100%)
  - E. Promise to comply. ("I'll help clean up in a minute.")  
(Reliability = 85.0%)
- II. Deny guilt: deny being a causal agent for the outcome in question. ("I didn't do it.") (Reliability = 78.5%)
- III. Offer an excuse, admitting that the outcome in question was bad, but denying complete responsibility. (Reliability = 85.5%)
  - A. Deny having adequate knowledge. ("I didn't know I was supposed to do that.") (Reliability = 98.6%)
  - B. Deny having intended the effect. ("I didn't mean to do that.") (Reliability = 87.0%)
  - C. Deny having been able to act otherwise or to prevent the outcome that occurred. ("I'm too short to put those things away.") (Reliability = 98.4%)
- IV. Offer a justification, admitting responsibility for the act in question, but denying that it was bad. (Reliability = 89.9%)
  - A. Deny that any real damage was done. ("I didn't really hurt you.") (Reliability = 82.1%)
  - B. Appeal to reciprocity norms. ("He hit me first.")  
(Reliability = 85.8%)
  - C. Appeal to higher goals. ("I did it to teach you a lesson.")  
(Reliability = 97.7%)
  - D. Deny that there is any rule against the behavior in question, or that the rule is applicable. ("You're allowed to do that on Fridays.") (Reliability = 97.9%)